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The Death of John Brown

A Discourse Preached on the
Occasion of His Public Execution
delivered at the
Free Congregational Church
Bloomington, Ill.
Dec. 4, 1859

By Charles Gordon Ames

*Reprinted in connection with the
Celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary
of the Founding of the Church*

OCTOBER 1909

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[From the Daily Pantagraph, Dec. 9, 1859]

CORRESPONDENCE

To the Rev. C. G. Ames, Pastor of the Free Congregational Society of Bloomington:

The undersigned, having heard with much interest your funeral discourse of yesterday on the death of John Brown, and believing that the cause of Truth will be subserved by a wider circulation of the views therein set forth, do very respectfully request that you will furnish us with a copy of the same for publication.

JESSE W. FELL,
K. H. FELL,
B. F. HAINS,
J. H. WICKIZER,
JAMES ALLIN, JR.,
R. W. DIBBLE,
S. D. ROUNDS,
JOHN MARBLE,
E. BARBER,
J. N. LARRIMORE,
JOSEPH BAKER,
W. H. HANNA,
SAMUEL WILLARD,

ELISHA WAKEFIELD,
ROBT. THOMPSON,
T. J. DONAHUE,
WM. M. RICHARDSON,
J. F. REES,
V. FELL,
THOMAS FELL,
WM. F. FLAGG,
W. W. ORME,
R. M. BENJAMIN,
JAMES H. SMITH,
WM. B. ALLYN.

December 5th, 1859.

[REPLY]

To J. W. Fell, Esq., Dr. S. Willard, and Others—Gentlemen:

Your note of 5th inst., requesting a copy of my last Sabbath's discourse for publication, is received.

I comply with your request, not unwilling that any words which you have heard with approval should reach a yet wider audience.

Yours for Humanity,

Charles G. Ames.

Bloomington, Dec. 7, 1859.

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J. Featherstonhaugh

July 22 1919

The Death of John Brown

A Discourse Preached on the Occasion of His Public Execution, Delivered at Bloomington, Ill., Dec. 4, 1859

By Charles Gordon Ames
Minister of the Free Congregational Society

Text.—“Judge not according to appearance; but judge righteous judgment.”—John VII: 24.

On any topic of such absorbing public interest as to set all other tongues in motion, a Christian minister has no right to be silent. Every event which excites the feelings and rouses the thought of the people must deeply affect their moral character and spiritual life. Events are our teachers. If we rightly interpret them, we grow wiser; if we misinterpret them, they do but lead us astray. If we gather useful instruction from any event, it must be because we see it in the clear light of some moral principle. The minister, whose high mission it is to deal with moral principles, must never hide their light under a bushel, when some event is passing by which the people are half afraid to look in the face. That light has a right to shine; and whatever cannot bear that light confesses itself to be evil.

There are two ways in which the pulpit may abuse its power; two ways in which a minister

may dishonor his position. One is by speaking what ought not to be spoken; the other is by not speaking what ought to be spoken---rashness and cowardice. If a minister falls into the evil current of party spirit, and lends himself to a narrow, fanatical love of agitation, pandering to passion and to a morbid craving for excitement, or to sectarian and party ends---that is a shame! Let him bear the indignation of an injured public. Preacher though he be, he is a pestilent fellow. We have no use for such. The sooner he quits the church and the world, the better for both.

But the pulpit is hardly less disgraced by the minister who betrays his trust through the timid, temporizing policy of withholding the fitting truth because it may be unwelcome to his hearers. He sees the truth, but dares not utter it. He knows the right, but dares not defend it. He will not attack the wrong, because it is still popular. He will not espouse the right, because it is still in a small minority. When it is evident that victory is to turn on Zion's side, you shall find him in the forefront of the battle, a bold leader of the hosts of the elect. But he has not faith enough in God to feel quite safe in taking sides with Him, nor love enough for the true and the right to stand by them in their hour of seeming weakness. He is "a dumb dog," a speaker of smooth things, false to God and man. There are no baser men than those who use holy words to hide an unfaithful and cowardly spirit, and who let all forms of wickedness find an undisturbed refuge in the very folds of the altar cloth.

Now, if a man rests in an easy-going conservative religion, which prides itself in standing aloof from all passing events, he will naturally regard a deaf and dumb clergyman as a model of fidelity; and so, taking such an one as a standard, he will condemn every faithful testimony against public wrong, and every pulpit discourse on an unusual topic, as loose, dangerous, and fanatical. But no man ought to venture on the duties of the Christian ministry until he can look the world in the face, and say from his heart with Paul: "It is a small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment. He that judgeth me is the Lord." It may do for politicians to determine all questions by mere rules of expediency, which slide here and there with ever-changing circumstances; but the prophet of God must point steadily to the eternal principles of truth and right.

Yet the most faithful and honest minister is fallible, like other men. His judgment on any matter may be good or bad, or partly of both. If what he may say does not seem true and wise to you, let it be as if he had not spoken. But, if his words help you to "judge righteous judgment," he is your benefactor. You and he may rejoice together.

The events which are exciting such a deep and painful interest in all parts of the country, and which found their climax forty-eight hours ago in the public execution of John Brown, will be differently regarded by different men. There will be honest differences of opinion according to our previous habits of thought and the extent and cor-

rectness of our information. The man who regards human slavery as "the sum of all villainies" will see the affair at Harper's Ferry with other eyes than those of that other man who thinks the institution is ordained and approved of God. On these matters of difference let us not deal violently nor uncharitably with each other. "Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind;" but let no man withhold the expression of his views simply because they are unlike those of any or all his neighbors. To speak freely and without fear on any and all subjects is one of the dearest of all our privileges; nor is that a desirable country to live in where men speak with bated breath as if afraid of their own thoughts.

I am to speak to-day not as a prosecuting officer to prove John Brown guilty of a capital crime, nor yet as his defending counsel, to make out, by any special pleading, a case in his favor. But I am to join with you in seeking to find a just verdict--the calm, impartial verdict which history will render, when the exciting passions and bitter prejudices of this stormy time shall have passed away forever. "I go into eternity but a few years before you!" said John Brown to the Governor of Virginia; and so he might have said to all of us who sit here, as it were to hold an inquest over his dead body. What interest have we in deceiving ourselves, when the exact truth will serve our purpose better? Let us forget party, dismiss bias, and hush our passions, that we may not hastily judge according to appearances, but "judge righteous judgment."

Two hundred and thirty-nine years ago this month the Mayflower brought to the coast of Massachusetts Bay a little band of Puritans---brought with it the seeds of our Revolution, and brought also in some sense the seeds of the recent outbreak at Harper's Ferry. For those Puritans were men who loved liberty religiously, if not always wisely; and one of them was Peter Brown, the great-grandfather of John Brown's grandfather. And from the old Puritan ancestor down to himself the whole line of six generations was composed of farmers---doubtless, like himself, men of sinewy muscle, robust constitution, and strong will, believing in the Bible as John Calvin explained it, and believing in Jehovah as the God of battles; hating oppression, but loving their country. John Brown's father was a soldier in the last war with England, and both father and son were present at Hull's surrender.

John Brown was early inclined to "do something for the benefit of mankind"; and, being disposed to piety as well as benevolence, he commenced to study for the ministry, I think of the Presbyterian denomination, of which he remained a member till his death. But inflamed eyes put a stop to his theologic studies, and he went back to the farm. During an active life for many years in Connecticut, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York, he seems to have been regarded as a man of unusual energy in business and of incorruptible integrity.

The armed invasion of Kansas, and the pollution of its ballot boxes by proslavery ruffians

from Missouri, roused his spirit; and, though growing gray, he started with several of his sons for the field of strife---already a "dark and bloody ground," though the Free State men, still trusting to the defense of the federal government, had not yet learned to defend themselves, much less to deal back those destructive blows by which John Brown afterward taught the invaders such salutary lessons. Avoiding public meetings, and despising the men who dealt in talk, resolutions, and the machinery of political conventions and parties, he gathered a small band of trusty men, inspired them with something of his own bravery and confidence and then performed such daring exploits as made his name a terror to evil doers. Once with a party of forty men he held a position in the woods against one hundred and fifty proslavery men for five hours, and finally obliged them to retire with a loss of thirty-one killed and thirty wounded, while he lost but two killed and one wounded.

It is doubtful whether any man contributed so largely to break the force of proslavery violence and open the way for Kansas to become a Free State as did John Brown. And the general testimony is that through all those terrible scenes he maintained a spirit of humane thoughtfulness for the welfare of even his enemies, and a religious devotion as profound and strict as that of Cromwell, rigidly prohibiting all profanity, and offering prayer in his camp every night and morning. I know there are charges of wanton cruelty brought against him; but it would be unjust not

to remark that most of the witnesses against him are men who have forfeited all claim upon public credit. Yet it would be strange if in those days of confusion and excitement any man in the heat of the conflict could act a part in every respect free from censure; nor is it my part, with but limited information, to justify, excuse, or condemn by the wholesale the part enacted by John Brown in Kansas. It is not the less safe to say that the worst men who ever set foot in that territory will be among the most clamorous of all who rejoice over his sad fate.

For the past twenty or thirty years, according to the statements of his wife and others, John Brown had been revolving in his mind projects for the overthrow of slavery in the United States. Whether he has always thought that violent methods were best I cannot say. But it is probable that what he saw in Kansas destroyed all hope that the slaveholder would ever let go his victim peacefully, and all expectation of a righteous use of the powers of the government; and his experience there gave him a high degree of confidence---perhaps amounting to conceit---in his ability as a military leader. And so for the last two years he seems to have been diligently engaged in organizing the rash expedition which cost his life.

Now, what did he mean? What were his principles, as he understood them? What were his motives and plans? Now he is dead, we can at least afford to do him justice; and, in order to do this, we want so far as possible to understand the man. We shall find him transparent---no mystery in him.

I think I never read of a man so easily comprehended---a man whose motives stood out so clearly, and whose principles and conduct required so little explanation to reconcile.

John Brown's view of slavery, of his own duty, and of the ends to be accomplished by his Harper's Ferry enterprise, will be best understood from his own words. When he was visited and questioned by Senator Mason and others, after his arrest and imprisonment, in the course of his conversations, he used the following words:

“I think you are guilty of a great wrong against God and humanity. It would be perfectly right for any one to interfere with you, so far as to free those you willfully and wickedly hold in bondage. I think I did right and that others will do right who interfere with you at any time and at all times. I hold that the Golden Rule [quoting it] applies to all who would help others gain their liberty. It is in my opinion the greatest service a man can render his God. I pity the poor in bondage. That is why I came here. It is not to gratify any personal animosity, or feeling of revenge, or vindictive spirit. It is my sympathy with the oppressed and wronged, who are as good as you in the sight of God. I want you to understand, gentlemen, that I respect the rights of the poorest and weakest of the colored people just as much as I do those of the most wealthy and powerful. That is the idea that has moved me, and that alone. We expected no reward. We expected to do for them in distress---the greatly oppressed---as we would be done by. The cry of distress,

and of the distressed, is my reason, and the only one that impelled me. I did it secretly, because I thought it necessary for success, and for no other reason. I don't think the people of the slave states will ever consider the subject of slavery in its true light until some other argument is resorted to than moral suasion."

When asked if he expected to bring about a general rising of the slaves in case he had succeeded, he replied: "No; nor did I wish it. I expected to gather strength from time to time; then I could set them free. * * * You people of the South had better all of you prepare for a settlement of this question. You may dispose of me very easily. I am nearly disposed of. But this question is still to be settled--the negro question, I mean. The end is not yet."

All this is John Brown's plain, honest thought; and it lets us see into his heart. He loved liberty for himself; and he had Christian feeling enough to love it for others. He thought of slavery as you think of piracy, and he thought of the slaves as you would think of your own brothers imprisoned by pirates, and living only by permission of pirate law---law for which he felt no respect, simply because it rests on the brutal lie which underlies all despotism, viz., that might makes right.

"The cry of distress," he says, impelled him. He heard, or thought he heard, a sound of woe from nearly four millions of human beings, whose rights he tells us he regarded as equally sacred with those of the rich and powerful. He goes to their relief at the risk of his life, just as he would

plunge into a burning building when he hears the piteous shriek of a child. He acted under the auspices of an organization holding it as a self-evident truth that "whenever a human being is set upon by a robber, ravisher, murderer, or tyrant of any kind, it is the duty of the bystander to go to his or her rescue, by force, if need be."

In perfect keeping with the language already given from his conversations in prison are his memorable words uttered in court, when he stood up to receive the sentence of death. After admitting distinctly his intention of "freeing the slaves on a large scale," he added these words of denial:

"I never did intend murder, or treason, or the destruction of property, or to incite the slaves to rebellion, or to make insurrection."

Then follow words which are destined to become a part of the everlasting literature of liberty:

"It is unjust that I should suffer such a penalty. * * * Had I so interfered in behalf of the rich and powerful, the intelligent, the so-called great, or in behalf of their friend, either father or mother, brother or sister, wife or children, or any of that class, and suffered and sacrificed what I have in this interference, it would have been all right, and every man in this court would have deemed it worthy of reward rather than punishment. * * * I have endeavored to act up to these instructions [of the Bible]. I am yet too young to understand that God is any respecter of persons. I believe that to have interfered as I have done, and as I have always freely admitted

that I have done, in behalf of His despised poor, was no wrong, but right. Now, if it is deemed necessary that I should forfeit my life for the furtherance of the ends of justice, and mingle my blood further with the blood of my children, and with the blood of the millions in this slave country whose rights are disregarded by wicked, cruel, and unjust enactments, I submit! So let it be done!"

I have quoted thus freely to show exactly his principles and the sentiments of his heart. It will be said that they show a morbid interest in the freedom of the slave and an utter forgetfulness of the safety and welfare of the white population of the South. But there are positive evidences that his very regard for the whites and his aversion to shedding blood was one of the prime causes why he failed in his enterprise. He detained a train of cars for a while, and then, concluding it was hard to put the passengers to such inconvenience, let them go on and give information against himself. He had forty of the citizens of Harper's Ferry in his power as prisoners for many hours; but not one of them suffered the least indignity or discourtesy---not one of them even had his hands tied; and when the engine-house, where they were confined with him and his handful of men, was being fired upon by the soldiery, he obliged them to lie down under shelter, lest they should be exposed to the balls. In Cook's confession we are told that, before striking a blow, Brown called his men together and addressed them on the importance of conducting their hazardous enterprise as peacefully as possible, saying: "You all know

how dear life is to you. Remember that it is equally dear to others. Fire on no one who does not bear arms against us; but, if you do fire, make sure work of it."

In a public speech at Richmond, after visiting Brown in jail, Gov. Wise testified thus:

"He is a man of clear head, courage, fortitude, and simple ingenuousness. He inspired me with great trust in his integrity as a man of truth. He is a fanatic, vain and garrulous, but firm, truthful, and intelligent."

Singular qualities in a felon! The curse of God and man be on the institution whose safety calls for the death of a man like this.

Brown had no thought of plunder. In the armory he had seized were \$17,000 of public funds. He took the arms to be used for his purpose, but the money was untouched. One of the railway passengers, with \$10,000 on his person, was searched for weapons; but the money was not meddled with.

But while all these things, and many more like them, furnish ample evidence of John Brown's humanity and unselfishness, they cannot relieve him from the charge of wrong-headedness. His very humanity and zeal infatuated him---in the same sense as we are all infatuated by too ardent desire ---so that he underestimated difficulties and overestimated his own strength and tact. What folly for twenty-two men to seize upon a town and public arsenal, in the very neighborhood of Washington and Baltimore! What folly to suppose that the ignorant and brutal crowd of slaves whom he hop-

ed to draw to his standard, and to furnish with arms, could be restrained from the violent and revengeful use of their newly-gained liberty, knowing as they would that no effort would be spared to reduce them again to bondage, and that no mercy could be expected! What folly to suppose there would be no civil war, when the mass of the whites would be exasperated to the highest pitch of frenzy by the presence of a Northern invader, raising openly the standard of compulsory emancipation! And what utter blindness led that humane hearted old man to imagine that no innocent persons would suffer through the general and violent disorganization of society, and the explosive outbreak of all the mad passions and rankling hates, engendered for ages by the false and bitter relations of slavery! He seems to have supposed that all these terrific forces of wild volcanic fury could be controlled by his authority, harnessed tamely into the service of freedom, and made to work with the precision of machinery, like the ready obedience of his own little band of Spartans!

A gentleman who sat with us three or four Sabbaths since writes me from Memphis that on Thanksgiving Day he heard a clergyman of that city give thanks that the fuse lighted by the fires of fanaticism had been extinguished before it reached the mine and produced a disastrous explosion. So do I give thanks to God that John Brown has failed; for I believe the only success which, under the circumstances, was possible to him, would have drawn after it consequences at which his own kind heart would have revolted.

His wisdom was like that of the man who puts a match to a magazine of powder, hoping to control, regulate, and graduate the explosion with his hand.

Perhaps, however, it may yet appear that he foresaw that all these direful consequences were possible, but thought them entirely improbable, and thought, also, that, should matters come to the worst, the responsibility would rest on those who refused to "let the oppressed go free," and thereby invited the retribution on their own heads, even as Jefferson had taught him in words of trembling confession that, in case of a struggle between the slaves of Virginia and their masters, no attribute of the Almighty could take sides with the masters. What Brown's real views on these points were we shall doubtless know from the document he has been preparing during the last week of his earthly life---unless, indeed, the authorities of Virginia should be as fearful of his word as of his deeds. I think it will be seen that his real plan was to do one of two things, according as circumstances should favor: Either to arm such slaves as might come to him, and march them in a body to Canada, acting strictly on the defensive; or, if he should have power to gain a strong position among the mountains, establish a kind of temporary community under what is called his Provisional Constitution, and encourage fugitives to come to him from all quarters. He believed it right to take the property of the masters for the benefit of the slaves; and he hoped thus to keep up an increasing system of harassings, with little bloodshed, but having the

effect to produce a chronic panic, so that slavery would waste itself away with fever. By forcing the slaveholders to dwell "in the midst of alarms"; by making them feel more deeply than ever the wretched insecurity of their system and of property; by making all labor irregular and uncertain, and so preventing both seedtime and harvest; by thus increasing the public burdens, while destroying the public credit--by these means he may have hoped to make slavery unprofitable, and to force the millions of nonslaveholders to resume their manhood, and to say at length to the three hundred and fifty thousand slaveholders: "We will not bear this yoke for your sakes any longer! Either consent to emancipation, or watch your own property, and take care of your own lives." (For it is plain that no slaveholder can maintain unaided his authority over ten slaves--the average to each master.) Whether such was John Brown's plan or not, it seems certain to become the real order of things at the South, just as fast as the bondmen become more intelligent and more restless, and just as soon as the self-degraded nonslaveholding whites come to appreciate their position and power.

But if such was Brown's real object, it seems to me unwise; for the inauguration of this state of things should be the work of the slaves themselves, the result of their own keen inward discontent, the outbirth of their own keen sense of wrong, and not the work of a premature and meddling band from abroad. These evil results of slavery and retributive remedies ought to be left to work

themselves out; and they will be hard enough to bear, both for master and slave, without being aggravated and embittered by rankling hatreds, imported from other sections. Nor do I believe the welfare of the slave would in the end be promoted so well by a liberty gained under the sudden stimulus of foreign and violent aid as if gained by the slower and more peaceful methods, which God grant may not prove impossible!

And so I condemn John Brown's method, while I praise his motives. I find fault with his head, while I honor his heart. I regret his blundering haste, and his rash and foolish violence; but I love and glory in the cause for which he died. He is no selfish robber, or bloodthirsty assassin, but an unpretending, honest-hearted philanthropist, deluded to the overdoing of his duty, and misguided by the wrong application of right principle, for which he may be no more blameworthy than we all are for our errors of judgment in the less important concerns of everyday life. The qualities which lived in him to excess were noble qualities, more honored in his failure than they would have been by his success. For his own sake, for the pleasantness of his memory, as well as for the sake of the cause he loved so well, and for the sake of the whole country, I am glad he failed; because I am forced to conclude that under the circumstances the only success which he could have gained would have been a greater failure. If he could have succeeded in the broadest and deepest sense, succeeded according to his own high and generous ideal, of liberating many thousands of slaves with

but little bloodshed, such success as that would have made him the nation's benefactor, and I would have rejoiced in his triumph. But that was out of the question; his means were unequal to the accomplishment of what his great heart coveted; he could only have kindled a conflagration which would have scorched and consumed those whom he sought to rescue; and he himself would prefer to die. He would heartily join in the language of one of his comrades in arms, who is soon to follow him up the gallows ladder to a scaffold of glory: "Ten thousand or million deaths if I can by that means benefit the cause!" What hero of the Revolution could say more?

Let us "judge righteous judgment." What John Brown did was on his part a sad mistake; but what he meant in his inmost thought was neither treason nor murder, but duty, humanity, and patriotism. And sooner or later he will get the credit of it. The best thought which ever crossed the mind of your great historic military heroes, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, was far below the worst thing we know of Brown. Had his army of twenty-two swelled to a hundred thousand, he would never knowingly have touched your liberty or mine, nor that of any other human being, except that he might make it more secure. He would never have disturbed willfully one foundation stone of the Union, unless to pluck away the bloody cement, that he might bind these states more firmly together in the love of justice and in the spirit of mutual regard. Men talk of his scheme for a "Provisional Government" as though

it were intended by him to overthrow and supplant the federal Union. Such a charge might be brought with equal reason against the organizations formed in the early history of Illinois for the suppression of horse stealing, when there was not law enough to protect the people. John Brown's "Constitution" was only intended for temporary use, and expressly provided that nothing in it contained should be construed to encourage the overthrow of existing state or federal governments. It was poorly enough planned for its own objects, and shows much more familiarity with matters of moral reform than with legislation.

There may be technical treason in John Brown's acts, but there is no treason in his spirit. Treason, indeed! Do we forget that it is hardly four years since the present governor of Virginia declared that he would seize this same federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry, in case of the election of a President opposed to the extension of slavery? John Brown has only done for freedom what Governor Wise pledged himself to do for slavery! We pardon everything to the Southern propaganda; we can pardon nothing to the spirit of liberty.

They are the traitors, who have perverted justice and prostituted the powers of the government, so that it is made an instrument for the perpetration of crimes so foul that they drive the purest-hearted men to madness! That will be a sad day for our country when no citizen feels his spirit roused, and his "sinews change to steel," when the gates of justice are slammed in the faces of

men simply because they are poor and weak, and wear a skin of such color as their Maker gave them; a sad day when we can all look on calmly and see the government gradually transformed into a conspiracy for the punishment of innocent men as criminals, and the giving of honor to the greatest knaves---a conspiracy in which the true objects of government get so utterly confounded that villainy sits on the bench of justice to give sentence against virtue. Let us thank God that we are not yet incapable of feeling shame and indignation at the spirit of real treason, sedition, and murder which strides the land, and which has made the upholding of slavery the main object for which our government now exists.

And there is no more hopeful symptom than the widespread sympathy awakened throughout the country---which I doubt not is as deep and extensive in the South as in the North, like fire under the turf---in behalf of the true-hearted but wrong-headed hero whose life has paid the forfeit of his noble error. Men condemn his conduct, but they admire his manhood, and secretly or openly respect the cause he sought to serve.

Had he succeeded in doing all he wished, succeeded in that broad sense already described, he would have been hailed as a deliverer---like that William of Orange who drove the tyrant James II out of the English throne; like that general who went to Algiers to rescue white Americans from Algerine slavery; like Garibaldi, who has rendered such service to Italian liberty; or like that Moses, who led out of Egypt some three mil-

lions of fugitive slaves no whit better prepared for liberty than our own, so poorly prepared that they went towards their Canaanitish Canada grumbling because of their hard fare in the wilderness, longing for the fleshpots of Egypt, and murmuring against the man who under God had broken their chains. But William of Orange, and the American general at Algiers, and Garibaldi, and Moses succeeded. John Brown has failed. So they wear laurels of honor, and he goes to the gibbet. So Louis Kossuth failed to deliver Hungary, and only saves his head by voluntary exile.

Between "George Washington, first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen," and George Washington, hanged as a bloody insurrectionist and traitor to his lawful sovereign, there is one word which fills up all the broad space---"Success!" So between John Brown, the murderous conspirator, hooted into eternity from the top of a scaffold, and John Brown, standing proudly on a monument of broken chains, crowned with the tearful gratitude of thousands of delivered slaves, and with the admiring applause of hundreds of thousands of white freemen who now condemn him, there is one word which fills all the space---"Failure!" For I think that no man, who will examine with care and candor all the accounts given us of his whole career by friends and enemies, can doubt for a moment that his inmost motives were as pure, and the objects which he sought as they lay in his own mind and heart were as holy, as the motives and objects of William of Orange, Kossuth, Garibaldi, Wash-

ington, or Moses, all of whom accomplished their work at immense sacrifice of life, and with the exception of Moses by an appeal to the sword.

Nor will John Brown's gross errors of judgment and his mistaken method of promoting a righteous cause prevent his being regarded in coming ages according to his real character and objects. The Christian missionary, who throws away his life in a vain attempt to introduce the Gospel among the cannibals, and whose zeal yields no obvious fruits, except to excite in them a hankering after more human flesh, is not the less canonized as a martyr. The church does not stay to inquire about his want of prudence, his needless self-exposure, the folly of his method. He dies for Christ--he dies for man; and that fact becomes a halo of glory around his head as he passes up to shine among the stars of God. And the world will glorify the memory of John Brown because he died for liberty. History will not deal in careful criticisms upon his personal infirmities, his errors of judgment, his conceit and talkativeness. His heroism, his self-forgetfulness, his simplicity of character, his "bearing the yoke of the oppressed as upon his own neck for thirty years," his honest zeal outrunning all prudence, his manly bearing and high religious faith and self-possession before the court---not excelled since our Elder Brother stood before the unjust bar of Pilate---all those will be faithfully studied and duly honored. For, be it remembered, the future will have no interest in slavery, and its highest honors will be reserved for those who have openly hated and

opposed it in the days of its arrogance and power, when the very names of the Virginian governor, judge, and hangman will be forgotten like those of Pharaoh's generals. For the names of the too ardent lovers of liberty are a part of the world's richest treasures; and the hymns of freedom in all countries do perpetually and exultingly teach us that

"Whether upon the gallows high,
Or in the battle's van,
The noblest death that man can die
Is when he dies for man."

I think there are three scenes in the tragedy at Harper's Ferry which will live in the picture galleries of the world.

One of them will represent the stalwart old man, with gray hair and white beard, hemmed in by United States marines, your soldiers and mine, with his few remaining companions still true to their captain, with his crowd of unfettered prisoners crouching in the rear, while with the finger of his left hand he feels the pulse of his dying boy, and with his right poises the rifle to fire upon his foes.

Another will portray that same old man, his hair matted with blood and his face disfigured with wounds, stretched upon a cot in a Virginia court room, listening to the details of his own trial, the calmest man in the room! Those wounds in his head and face are cuts from the sword of Lieut. Stuart, an officer the people of Illinois have helped to arm and commission, and were inflicted after

the old man had fallen, though the valorous lieutenant declares he was "defending himself with his gun."

And a third picture will reveal John Brown as a prisoner in jail, with fire in his gray eye, as he points to the door, and indignantly spurns the proslavery clergyman, saying: "Go! You and I do not worship the same God! I want nothing of such as you!"

I saw John Brown once. It was at an anti-slavery meeting in Boston, last May. Other men were speaking words which made my pulses beat quicker, and which moved the whole assembly. He seemed almost indifferent. I understand it now. He despised talk; but he believed in action. The moral agitators were engaged in what he thought a hopeless task; for he believed the oppressor would never relax his grip upon the slave till he was obliged to do it. And while they thundered eloquent denunciations from afar, he was saying in his heart: "I will go near to the old Bastile of tyranny; and in the strength of God I will smite it with a blow that shall tell! Even if I perish, my stroke will be felt." And the old man prayed Almighty God to help him strike hard, and strike in the right place. And that God, whose all-wise providence employs all such material as is in its hand for the working out of unseen purposes of beneficence, using alike the fighting man and the man of peace, calling into His service our errors as well as our little wisdom, heard and answered his prayers, but not in the way which his short-sighted wisdom looked for. He found him-

self lying a helpless prisoner, with all his plans frustrated, with his fellows killed or captured, with the bodies of his children buried with dishonor by the hands of angry strangers, only to be dug up and hurried to the dissecting room, there to lie for hours naked and exposed to repeated insults of cowardly enemies. His heart grew heavy with the disappointment; and he blamed, never his motives, but his generalship. But the hasty trial came on, the sentence of death was pronounced, he saw the gallows not far distant, the near prospect of eternity brought back his faith, and he saw, what we may see, that the hand of that Wise Providence would make his very failure better and grander than success. He says: "I am worth inconceivably more to hang, than for any other purpose. I have fought the good fight, and nearly finished my course. I am exceeding joyful in all my tribulations. God has taken away my sword of steel; but He has given me instead the sword of the Spirit."

Never was such a hanging before! The very deed of horror which places a seal upon his lips forever becomes eloquent as the tongue of a prophet. Like that first gun of the Revolution, which, as Emerson says, "was heard round the world," so is the deed of John Brown. No other man, living or dead, has ever struck a blow which so shook the system of slavery to its foundations. God grant it may never get over it, but go tumbling to its utter destruction. The panic which spreads from the Potomac to the Rio del Norte is the result of the public and emphatic utterance of an

idea---the idea that slavery itself is lawlessness, and universal freedom alone is law and order. The boiling and turmoil of political parties at the North is comparatively a trifle. The terror of the South means everything. It is a confession of conscious weakness and conscious wrong.

I think there are three ways in which John Brown has hastened the inevitable downfall of slavery: By the effect of his strange deed on the mind of the slave; by its effect on the mind of the slaveholder; and by its effect on the state of the question before the nation. On each of these points something must be said.

The slave can never be made free with immediate advantage to himself till he has some sense of the value and uses of liberty. John Brown perhaps did not fully understand that; but Providence did not the less employ him to bring forward that very thing. The slave's great want is self-respect---the feeling that he is really a man, with rights and duties. Give him once the full idea of what it is to be free, and he will straightway begin to yearn after it and grow toward it. Now the knowledge of what John Brown has done and suffered, and the reason of it, will travel to the remotest plantation. The slaves who are being sold southward in such haste will carry startling reports to the cotton fields and rice swamps. There is no more mighty power than the power of growth---the power of inward life forcing itself outwards, as of the seed germ pushing up through the soil into the sunlight, or of treelife, pressing all elements into its service and bursting

into a thousand buds. And soul growth comes from ideas quickening themselves into action. It is easy to pass laws forbidding men to read; but no law can arrest the thought, or prevent the growth of a living idea once fairly sprouted in the soul. John Brown's blood, freely shed, will moisten and warm into more vigorous germination, all over the South, that idea of liberty which God has planted in all souls, and surely not less in the breast of the African than in that of the Anglo-Saxon. Increased rigors and more vigilant police will only sharpen inventive wit, making runaways more frequent and discontent more general.

Still more fatal to slavery is the increased timidity of the slaveholder. Increased timidity, for with all the bluster and high talk about the content and happiness of the slave, no slaveholding community is ever entirely free from apprehension. The highest Southern authorities confess it. Jefferson bases upon it his prophecy of evil. Senator Foote portrayed it in vivid colors on the floor of the Senate, and upbraided Northern men as helping to stimulate insurrection. John Randolph once said: "The night bell never tolls for fire in Richmond, but the mother clasps her babe more closely in her arms." Josiah Quincy, Jr., recently spoke of hearing a Southern gentleman laugh at the idea of being afraid of slaves; but he adds that he afterward heard that same gentleman confess that he never slept without pistols under his pillow. "The Southern powder house" is a proverbial description of the institution and its ever-present perils.

But this unnatural and monstrous feature of Southern life, and these elements of insecurity and alarm brooding like a nightmare over the slaveholding population, have never been so clearly made manifest as by the event of Harper's Ferry. John Brown has laid bare the weakest point of the system to the eyes of the world. It is as if God had let loose a great storm of wind upon the ocean, tearing and lifting the waters into yawning chasms, letting us look down to the bare and jagged rocks at the bottom. The slave sees it. He knows that his master fears him. Worst of all, the master knows that the slave knows it.

True, the Southern press exults over the report that the slaves would not join John Brown, as an all-convincing proof of their satisfaction and repose under the patriarchal rule. The Memphis clergyman before mentioned gives thanks for this new evidence that the servants are loyal to those who have given them the blessings of Christian teaching? But all this is thinly veiled pretense. Their words look one way, their conduct another.

The slaves did not join John Brown; but why? If because they were cowardly, or because they preferred bondage to freedom, that is in itself the most damning of all testimonies to the degrading effect of slavery upon them. But it is likely that the true reason why they did not join in the effort for their own deliverance is because they were not generally apprised of it; and that the outbreak fortunately came to an end, or was in a fair way to fail, before they understood its true nature. Cook

had resided at Harper's Ferry for some months; but in his confession he tells us that Brown had given him strict charge not to acquaint the slaves with the plan, and to make no conversation with them on the subject---a charge which he says he obeyed to the letter, except that he once asked some negroes if they desired liberty, to which they replied that they thought they ought to be free, but had little hope of it; when he simply told them to be of good courage, as there might be a good time coming. Yet the South Carolina papers say that the slaves on the estates did actually arm themselves with rude weapons, and started stealthily for Harper's Ferry, as is now supposed; but their movements were watched, and their escape prevented.

But if John Brown has satisfied the slaveholders of the contentedness of their human chattels, what means the general alarm? Why are the people of Virginia advised to remain at home and watch their own affairs, on execution day? Why is every Northern traveler turned back, and every free-spoken antislavery man in the South driven from his home or lynched? Why do all hearts palpitate with every unusual stir among the blacks? Why are the cities and villages governed by vigilance committees? Why do the very screams of the night birds startle the sleeping people, as though a destroying angel were ready to pass through the land and smite all the first-born?

There is but one cause for all this nervousness and terror. Slavery blockades the whole South.

The helpless, ignorant black man holds his proud master in a state of perpetual siege. The sword which Dionysius, tyrant of Sicily, always saw suspended over his head by a single hair, hangs over the household of every slaveholder. This is no overdrawn picture. As I have already shown, it is no more highly colored than those which Southern statesmen have drawn. The pleasant representations of slave society and of the affection felt for some masters are true in many cases, and I am glad they are true; but this agreeable admission does not affect the general fact, which John Brown has made to stand out in bolder relief than ever, that slavery throws the subject race into false, bitter, and dangerous relations with the dominant one.

Judge Jay quotes the Southern Religious Telegraph as saying: "Hatred to the whites, with the exception in some cases of attachment to the person and family of the master, is nearly universal among the black population. We have a foe cherished in our very bosoms---a foe willing to draw our life blood whenever the opportunity offers." And the Maysville Intelligencer speaks of an "innate desire for liberty, ever ready to act itself out in the bosom of every rational creature."

By just so much as John Brown has quickened that desire for liberty, by just so much has he increased the apprehensions of the master, and loaded his heart with anxiety and alarm. There is but one possible peaceful remedy, but one possible termination for this reign of terror, and that is

Emancipation. Drop the lash system, and try the cash system.

“Let the hand that tills the soil
Be like the wind that fans it—free.”

Give the laborer an interest in his own industry. Be simply honest with him. Pay him for his work, and there is no danger that he will cut the master’s throat. Do him justice, treat him as a man, and he will be a fast friend. Either this, something like this, something looking toward this, or ever-increasing dangers, converging to that terrible crisis

“When vengeance shall her tocsin toll,
And insurrection’s storm shall roll
Like the strong surgings of the deep,”

involving master and slave in one common wide-spread ruin.

And now I must speak of John Brown’s great, blundering blow as it affects the general state of the question before the nation. We have striven in vain to dodge the whole matter of our duty by compromises, political tactics, and resolutions against agitation. But John Brown has moved the previous question, and forced us to vote. God loves the nation too well, He loves the North and the South, the slave and the master, too well, to let us rest in peace under the shadow of our great crime. He lets these awful events come to tell us that we are to be holden to a strict account for our action or inaction. He bids us “choose this day” which we will serve, freedom or slavery; for, however we may desire it, neutrality is now out of

the question. Every man's sympathies must be either for or against the principle for which a pure-minded man has bravely laid down his life.

More than that: We have been secretly thinking, or timidly saying: "Slavery is unfit to live. It is a sin and a shame. But it is like an unmanageable disease, a cancer, which it is dangerous to touch and still more dangerous to let alone. We will do what we can to keep it from spreading; and leave it to Southern men to take care of it themselves. It is none of our business."

But the slaveholder has been saying: "You shall make it your business. It is not cancer or disease. It is life, health, and beauty. It shall live forever, and we will make this Union an instrument for preserving and extending it, or we will overturn the Union. You shall be the 'jailers and constables' of the institution. If a slave runs away, you shall help us catch him, and the expense of his capture shall be paid out of the common treasury. If a number of slaves revolt, you shall help us bring them under the yoke. Slavery shall be the nation's concern, and you men of the North, along with the mean whites of the South, shall be its bodyguard. If the Union does not work for this result, we want nothing of it."

And so, instead of being a nation of so many millions of freemen, we have become simply a nation of three hundred and fifty thousand slaveholders. Not the negro alone, but the nonslaveholding white man also, is without any rights which the slaveholder feels bound to respect. If you doubt it, go into a slave state and speak your

mind concerning the institution. You will find it true to your sorrow that the handful of slaveholders constitute the nation. There is no power in the land which will protect you from their fury. The government is theirs. Congress meets for them. Courts decree injustice for them. We wage war for them. John Brown breaks the law and sheds blood to deliver their bondmen, the federal government makes haste to snuff out the insurrection, and the mistaken old man goes hurrying to the scaffold. But this very year some thousands of human beings are violently kidnapped from Africa, amid scenes of blood and horror compared with which Harper's Ferry is as a drop in the bucket. They are brought to Southern ports and openly sold; and, though the laws of this land stamp this foreign slave trade as piracy, punishable with death, the government is helpless. Not a slave trader can be convicted. High-handed lawlessness goes scot free and finds ample advocacy, when it is on the side of slavery; but the lawlessness of too great zeal for liberty swings on the gallows!

The question of the hour is, shall we cower like slaves, and let John Brown's error frighten us into easy acquiescence in all the monstrous demands which are made upon us by the arrogance of that system of utter lawlessness, fraud, and violence? On that momentous question it is not for me now to enlarge. The events which are ripening upon us will give it emphasis enough to fix it in the attention of every man who feels the grand responsibilities of American citizenship.

And let me here say to you, what I deeply feel, that these are no times for passion, or uncalculating precipitancy of action. Let every man hold his mind in sober, even balance, that the duties which coming events may devolve upon us may be discharged firmly and promptly, but in the highest spirit of wisdom. We can ill afford to lose our wits in this double crisis of difficulty and danger. I believe that every person in the land, whether he knows it or not, has a deep interest at stake in the settlement of this exciting and troublesome question of slavery on the basis of natural justice and right, so that it may stay settled forever. Nor can it be desirable that excitement and trouble should cease until we have conscience enough to settle it on that righteous basis.

Equally deep is our common interest in settling it without blood, and in healthful conformity with those laws of social order by which God leads the nations upward. We want no strife between the North and South, nor between the black man and the white. But it is both idle and foolish, if not wicked, to seek tranquility while slavery exists. The thought of peace and amity while that institution lives and sets up such atrocious pretensions is as vain as to look for quiet in a whirlwind where two storms meet. When the nationalization of slavery became a settled purpose of the slaveholding interest, a conflict was inevitable, if the North retained any conscience whatever. So it is not agitation which has brought us into this evil; but this evil has brought on the agitation. The man who tells us there is an "irrepressible conflict" between

freedom and slavery does not produce that conflict by mentioning it. He only states what every thoughtful man knows to be a fact; a fact of history, and a fact of to-day; a fact which Harper's Ferry only confirms and makes obvious to all eyes. That conflict does not end with John Brown's life. It only deepens and darkens, as men ponder over the details of his short and strange career and his sad, but glorious, fate.

It only remains for us to ask where we shall stand and what we shall do in this unavoidable struggle. Carnal weapons! They are not called for, and God grant we may never have use for them. War---red, savage, indiscriminate war, with its garments rolled in blood, with its slaughter of women and children, its heaps of gory, mangled corpses, its devouring flames, leaping from rafter to rafter of burning cities, with the unutterable atrocities which mark its progress, and the black and blasted track of desolation which it leaves behind---ah! I cannot invoke these, even in aid of human liberty. I think a man can be the friend of the slave without being the enemy of the master. Anarchy, disorder, violence, and bloodshed can have no fascination for any heart in sympathy with God's great law of love and his gospel of good will. If these terrible ministers of vengeance ever come, it will be because the slaveholder perversely refuses to "let the oppressed go free," and so gets ground to powder by insanely throwing himself across the track of progress. If he is ever overwhelmed by the waves of ruin, it will be because he follows the slaves into the Red Sea.

Truth, Law, and Justice! these are weapons mightier than the sword; and if John Brown did not well use them, he has taught us how to use them, for he has fixed the nation's gaze on slavery, and slavery cannot bear to be looked at. Wendell Phillips has said---and to me it seems wiser than some of his recent words: "Against the thoughtful and determined gaze of twenty millions of Christian men, no institution is wicked or powerful enough to stand!" But, oh! my friends, where shall we find those twenty millions of Christian men who are to look slavery out of countenance and out of the light of the sun?

It was my duty to give you my exact thought on these matters, so far as possible, without reserve and without exaggeration. I have done it---not in vain confidence, but in simple frankness, taking your candor for granted. Many of you think differently from me. I recognize your right, and do not question your honesty. I may be wrong, and you right. Further developments may confirm or disprove the opinions of John Brown which you have heard to-day. If he were a bad man---knave, hypocrite, and murderous cut-throat---I have no more interest than you in hiding his real character. And if, as I have no shade of doubt, he were a true man, laying his life on the holy altar of liberty from pure love of the injured and oppressed, you have no more interest than I in blackening his blessed memory with the charge of crime.



Nor does his personal character affect the merits of the cause in which he suffered death. John Brown's fame or infamy is not the great matter at issue. Slavery is on trial for its life; and we are in court, interested parties, likely to be arraigned before God and the world as accomplices in the guilt of upholding it, by the abuse of our influence, by our contempt for the colored man, by our sympathy and countenance of his oppressors, and by our criminal misuse of the power given us as American citizens. God help us to wash our hands in innocency of the great transgression, and to serve our country by serving with our highest wisdom the holy cause of Human Brotherhood and Universal Justice--the cause of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity.

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